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MISSILE STRENGTH IN SOVIET DISPUTED

Weinberger and Senator Argue About Warhead Numbers

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 21 — Senator James A. McClure, Republican of Idaho, and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, have got into a dispute over tactics intended to win support for the MX nuclear missile, according to a staff aide for the Senator.

The aide, David Sullivan, said in an interview that the Senator had evidence from intelligence agencies that the Soviet Union had 8,500 nuclear warheads on its various intercontinental missiles.

But the Pentagon, Mr. Sullivan said, insists in public documents that the total is 6,500, giving the Soviet Union an edge of 3 to 1 rather than 4 to 1.

Senator McClure, according to his aide, feels that the higher figure should be made public to build support for the MX. Mr. Sullivan said Secretary Weinberger's position is that the larger number would undercut support.

Democrats who are opposed to the MX argue that this new 10-warhead missile, which is to be placed in existing Minuteman silos, would be vulnerable to Soviet attack and is therefore a waste of money.

The Senate approved funds for 21 MX missiles this week. The House is scheduled to vote twice on the issue under a compromise between advocates and adversaries of the MX reached last year. One vote will be on whether to authorize production of the 21 missiles, the second to appropriate the funds.

Senator McClure, in a letter to Mr. Weinberger, said, "We should not continue to mislead ourselves, the Congress and the American people on this important issue."

A spokesman for Mr. Weinberger said the Defense Secretary had written Senator McClure saying that there was a "range of uncertainty" about the number of warheads and that an official from the Defense Intelligence Agency would explain that range to the Senator.

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